

# Learning from the Learner

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*By Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez (Spain)*

In the past few years and as a consequence of the multiple changes and innovations taking place in English language teaching, a great emphasis has been placed on the learner as the main focus of attention. This gave rise to the notion of a learner-centred or learner-based curriculum, which differs notably from the traditional curriculum, as it is based primarily on a collaborative process between teachers and learners rather than on a number of rules and norms imposed from outside (Nunan 1988).

In a parallel direction, there has been a tendency to focus on learners' needs. It is assumed that a particular syllabus for a particular group of learners should not be designed in a vacuum; rather, it should match students' needs as closely as possible. The idea of focusing on learners' needs owes much to the Council of Europe projects conducted by Richterich and Wilkins (1975/1980) and Richterich and Chancerel (1977/1980). These scholars attempted to identify and define the needs of European adult learners by means of "quantitative and qualitative information," which should make it possible to depart from a "common core" of functions and topics at the start of the programme. Their work has been questioned because of their excessive generalizations, as they intended to come up with a standard model that could be applied to all the member states of the European Council. Munby (1978) also proposed a framework of needs analysis that was relatively influential initially but widely criticized in later years. He produced an end-driven system that allowed him to make syllabuses based on a paradigm of native-speaker competence but disregarding methodological and administrative variables.

This idea of considering the learner as much as possible is directly connected with the title of this article, "Learning from the Learner." English-language teachers should learn continually from their students, with the purpose of incorporating everything they learn into their teaching.

## What Can English Teachers Learn from Their Learners?

Teachers are constantly being enriched by daily contact with their learners, which puts them in touch with different perspectives and ways of looking at things. Things that teachers may usefully learn from their pupils include the following.

*Students' Attitudes towards English and the English Class.* Are these positive or negative? Do the students consider English important? How do they rate it in comparison with other subjects or disciplines? What are their attitudes towards the target culture?

*Students' Motivations.* Are they learning English just because it is required? Because they like it? Because they are interested in British/American culture and/or literature? Because they think they may get a better job? Because they would like to communicate with people in other countries? Because they like traveling?

*Learners' Preferences for Teaching Materials.* Do they consider textbooks necessary? What sort do they like best? What language do they prefer for explanations in their teaching materials? Do they like having a glossary of vocabulary at the end of the textbook? What sort of characters do they prefer in their textbooks? What sort of topics do they like best?

*Learners' Preferences for Teaching Activities.* What activities do they find most interesting/useful? How do they rate in interest/usefulness the various teaching activities (role play, dictations, writing practice, listening to tapes/songs, pronunciation exercises, oral tasks, watching videos, etc.)?

*Learners' Preferences for Different Forms of Classroom Interaction.* Do they like working in pairs, in small/large groups, individually, etc.?

*Learners' Views on the Four Language Skills.* How do they rate in importance the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)?

*Learners' Preferences regarding the Assessment Method/System.* When and how would students like to be assessed? By means of tests, through individual/group projects, self-assessment, etc.?

*Learners' Views on the Roles of the Teacher and the Learners.* Are students happy with the teacher's management of the class? What aspects can be improved? Does the student prefer a passive or an active role?

*Learners' Use of Learning Strategies and Study Skills.* Are learners aware of their own use of learning strategies? What sort of learning strategies do they prefer to use? When do they make use of learning strategies?

Many other issues could be included in the above list, depending on the situation and the teacher's objectives. Certainly, the issues listed should be taken into account, as they will lead to a better understanding of what our students want and need, which should result in a general improvement of teaching and learning. Furthermore, through this process teachers may become researchers of their own classes, and this may bring about a form of teacher self-development without the teacher having to leave the classroom.

## **How Can We Learn from Our Learners?**

Once those areas of the teaching and learning processes that can be learned from our learners have been explored, we must next consider how all this can be learned—that is to say, the instruments that can be used to gather that information.

This will, again, depend on our aims, together with our own teaching and learning situation. The most common methods of information gathering are:

*Observation.* A careful observation of what is going on in the classroom may give us a clear indication of areas for analysis. Observation can be structured or unstructured, and may involve

the use of audio or video recording equipment. In general, observation is selective in focus and can easily be adapted to the individual classroom situation. However, it can interfere with teaching and classroom management.

Observation can be used to discover things about pupil interaction, the pupils' and teacher's language, students' participation, teacher and pupil movement in the classroom, etc.

*Questionnaires.* Questions may be open-ended, requiring respondents to answer in their own words, or multiple choice, requiring them to choose one or more answers from among those given. The students may also be provided with checklists or rating scales. When designing the questionnaire, the teacher should bear in mind the method to be used for analyzing the data obtained. Certain types of data may be analyzed manually, while other types, because of the large amount, the complexity, or attention to particular variables, will have to be processed by computer, using a statistical test such as ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), Factor Analysis, Chi-square, t-test, etc.

Teachers should also determine to what extent the questionnaires are reliable and valid.

*Individual/Group Interviews.* Answers obtained from interviews tend to be more valid than those from questionnaires, but interviews are usually more time-consuming to administer. Interviewers have to be careful not to influence the respondents' answers by the way the questions are formulated (bias).

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, and they can be individual or group interviews. Structured interviews are just a series of questions and answers. Semi-structured interviews often have an initial question followed by probes. This is the type most widely favoured by researchers on education, as it gives students the opportunity to express themselves freely under the interviewer's control. Individual respondents determine the shape of unstructured interviews. Group interviews can be carried out with varying degrees of structure; the interaction of respondents is the most important element.

*Individual/Group Discussions.* The points to be considered are written on the board or on a piece of paper and discussed in groups or by the class as a whole.

*Self-Reports.* Students are asked to write a report on a general or specific question. The teacher may discuss with the whole class some of the points raised by the students.

*Diaries.* Students are asked to keep a record of their daily experience in the English class. Although diaries should be personal, some of the students may be willing to share parts of their diaries with the teacher and the rest of the class.

*Protocols.* These are used as self-report verbal data and can be done retrospectively, or simultaneously with a particular task.

Protocols have been used by a number of investigators (Hosenfeld 1976, Flower and Hayes 1981, Arndt 1987) to discover what is going on during a problem-solving activity. The verbal

report may then be coded according to a scheme that will illustrate the kinds of mental operations engaged in by the subject at different stages of the activity.

*Sociometric Measures.* These are usually based on a question sheet filled out by the students. Sociometric measures give information about pupils' interpersonal relationships, and they are useful for deciding on the seating plan in a classroom, grouping students for group or pair work, etc.

*Unobtrusive Measures.* McCormick and James refer to this as "data being collected without the participant being aware of it" (1983:213). This includes physical traces, archives, notice boards, graffiti, letters to parents, etc.

## **When Can We Learn from Our Learners?**

It is important to consider when the information should be collected. Certain items of information, such as students' interests or attitudes, should be gathered at the beginning of the course so that the data can be integrated into course planning. An evaluation of the course should be conducted towards the end, when students and teacher have a more global view of class work. We believe, however, that teachers should be learning from their students all the time, as an ongoing process.

## **Three Models for Learning from Our Learners**

I next present three simple models of learning from our learners. Each is based on a questionnaire with several variants.

*A Needs-Analysis Instrument.* The first one is a basic "needs analysis" variant adapted from Shaw's "Ad Hoc Needs Analysis" (1982). It was used at the beginning of the school year. Pupils were asked to note 10 general objectives according to their degree of interest, first individually and then in groups of four. This was followed by a general group discussion

The information obtained was extremely valuable for course and lesson planning. Questionnaires were administered to five groups of first-year B.U.P. aged 13 to 15. Pupils gave the highest priority to listening to tapes, oral practice, and reading. Writing and the study of cultural aspects were valued lowest. Grammar practice, together with pair- and group-work activities, occupied a middle position in the students' ranking.

Pupils participated actively in the discussion, which was conducted in Spanish to favour communication. At the end of the year, the objectives explored at the beginning were taken up again to examine whether the objectives proposed had been partially or completely fulfilled.

*Pupils' Attitudes Questionnaire.* The other two questionnaires were administered at the end of the course. The first was designed to learn pupils' attitudes and views towards the teaching they had received, together with the importance they gave to English in relation to other subjects in

the curriculum. A questionnaire consisting of 10 questions was administered to a group of 40 first-year B.U.P. pupils. The questions were open-ended. The results indicated that English was generally considered an interesting subject, although it was more difficult for them than most of their other subjects. Pupils stressed the importance of having a good classroom atmosphere, but they criticized their teachers for being very demanding.

*Students' Evaluation Questionnaire.* The other questionnaire was concerned with students' evaluation of both the teaching and learning processes. It consisted of 34 items, and third-year B.U.P. pupils aged 16 to 18 were asked to answer them with three possible alternatives: "Yes, always," "Sometimes," and "No, never." It was divided into six main sections. The first one focused on various aspects of lesson planning and classroom management, such as the use of the blackboard and teaching aids, classroom language, and so on. The second section was devised to obtain pupils' views on the teaching materials (textbook and workbook) they were using. The third section centred on the method of assessment. The remaining three sections were directed to reveal students' views on teacher-student and teacher-whole class relationships, together with pupils' perceptions of the teacher as a person. Learners were also given the opportunity to add further comments if they desired.

The results obtained partially confirmed our expectations, but pupils identified certain issues we were not aware of in connection with our teaching practice. In general, they said they considered good use was made of the blackboard; we believed rather the opposite. Contrary to teachers' expectations, pupils tended to agree that there was some favouritism, and they also made it clear that the teachers did not feel completely comfortable in their classes.

## **The Need for Adaptation**

The three models described above indicate the areas that may be covered, together with the instruments to be used to help us learn from our learners. As usually happens in education, other teaching and learning contexts will require that they be adapted. We believe that becoming aware of ways in which to learn from our learners will make us better teachers.

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